

Q: The following Oral History interview was conducted by Jerry Green for the National Park Service, and Chief Petty Officer Dave Jarvis for the Naval Historical Center, for the USS Arizona Memorial at Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001, at 2:30 p.m. The person being interviewed is Jesse D. Gaines. Jesse Gaines was a Specialist Second Class at the Seventeenth- with the Seventeenth Airbase Squadron on December seventh, 1941. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth, and birth date.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Jesse Durward Gaines, Cold Water, Mississippi, 10-7-17.

Q: What did you consider your home town in 1941?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Cold Water, Mississippi.

Q: What were your parents' names?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Jesse Gaines, Ethel Lee Gaines.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did or do you have?

Jesse Durward Gaines: I had three brothers and one sister.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Greenleaf High School.

Q: Where did you enlist?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Memphis, Tennessee.

Q: And why did you enlist?

Jesse Durward Gaines: <Clears throat> Well, the things wasn't too good after the Depression. I had finished high school in 1936, and I was- worked in a cotton gin, in a sawmill, and drove a truck, and I said, "This won't get it." So one of my buddies said, "Let's join the service." So we went to Memphis. Went into the Post Office and joined up. The- the recruiter says, "You want to go home?" I said, "No, sir. Yeah. I come to join." So they gave me money. Put me on a train to Anderson, Alabama.

Q: Do you have anything else to say about your military background before coming to Hawaii training wise?

Jesse Durward Gaines: I have none.

Q: What were the circumstances that brought you to Hawaii in- in- when you came here?

Jesse Durward Gaines: I had an uncle that was in Hawaii, and I wanted to come over and see him. As I got to California and Angel Island, he's on his way back. So I didn't get to see him in Hawaii.

Q: But you came over at that time?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Yep.

Q: And what was that day, do you remember?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Uh.. It was in uh.. I left uh.. California in January, second or third, or something like that, in 1940.

Q: Where were you assigned in the days before the attack at Pearl Harbor?

Jesse Durward Gaines: You mean my duty?

Q: Yes.

Jesse Durward Gaines: I had several duties. I was uh.. a meat cutter. That was on my record. Then I didn't like the meat cutting, so they trained me to be a cook. I joined the Army Air Corps to be an airplane mechanic, but it took me three years to get to that stage.

Q: Where were you on December 7, 1941?

Jesse Durward Gaines: I was east of the Operation Building at Hickam Field, about a hundred yards east, some railroad tracks there. A buddy and I were there to see the B-17s come in from the states.

Q: Can you tell us about your day, that day, in some detail? What you were doing, and what you saw on December seventh.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Well, we went out there to see the airplanes come in. We were standing there chatting, and- and I heard some airplanes roaring, so we looked up and we saw a V formation of about fifty or sixty airplanes coming in from the, I guess you come by the right, which might have been west. And I made a remark to my friend. I said, uh.. "Hm, the Navy's out there. Gonna escort us in like that?" And he laughed and he says, "Yeah." So once they peeled off, started peeling off, I said, "Oh, we gonna have a show." Well, they came on down, and I said, "Oh, oh. He dropped a wheel." And my buddy said, "That ain't no wheel." Boom. And that's when it started.

Q: What else did you see?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Uh.. Well, uh.. <clears throat> when they started dropping the airplanes, I looked around and uh.. they were hitting Pearl Harbor. And we started running. Then they started hitting, hit uh.. Hickam there. And we were just like rabbits. We just running here and yonder. Look up, look down, scared hell like anybody else would be. Anybody tell me they're not scared when it happened, they're full of bull. I uh.. said, "Well, I must go to my squadron to get me a gun." I was trained on a pistol, 45 automatic. So as we were cr- crossing the parade ground, they were coming over dropping bombs. You could see 'em come out of the airplane. Uh.. We'd run this way, and we'd run that way. Some guy said, "Fall down by the curb." Uh.. We'd fall down by the curb and it'd slack up for th- three or four minutes, and uh.. and we'd get up and start across the parade ground. As we

crossed the parade ground, somebody had come out and set up a machinegun over close to the barracks. So we went inside, went inside to my supply room. I said, "I'd like to check out my pistol." "We don't have 'em. They locked up down at the ammunition dump." I said, "Hm." Uh.. In my mind I said, "Well, I'm going to the mess hall and get me some sandwiches, and I'm headed for the mountains. I don't have nothing to fight with. I'm gonna to run." So as I was fixing to go up the steps in the mess hall, about three steps up, the bomb hit, hit the mess hall. And when I came to, I was covered up in all the cinderblocks. And it was smoke, and it's- you could smell. I thought I was gassed. It was phosphorous, I guess, from it. So I lay there and I tried to twist a little bit, and finally I can make a little movement. And I finally got enough to look around, and I could see a little light back there. So I started wiggling. I crawled, and eventually I crawled myself out of the building. And as I got outside the building, I found one of my buddies. He come out and he didn't have a stitch of clothes on. It had sucked his clothes off. Then another one of my buddies come out. So we grabbed the one that didn't have any clothes. Of course there's blood all over his back, and of course there's blood in my face running down. I couldn't see, because I had cinders or shrapnel in my eyes. We uh.. proceeded to go to the hospital, which was a couple of blocks over. As we crossed the street, here come the Jap down strafing us. And he was treetop level. You could see him sitting right in the thing, babababa. See his gun goes, you know. But luckily we didn't get hit, so we proceeded toward the hospital. As we cro- near the hospital the flag pole was standing up out there at Hickam, and it was shot and shredded. I stood there and saluted that flag, and cried like a baby, and then I proceeded on. We all went into the hospital. As we got inside the hospital, they had 'em lined up inside with wounds, legs, and blood. I said, "I'm in pretty good shape. I'm gonna get out o' here." So I exited out of there and went to the officers' quarters behind the hospital, and found me a fish pond. And I was sitting down trying to clean out of my eyes there, 'cause every time I winked my eyes, uh.. they- they would cut. There was something sticking in there, and uh.. it was shrapnel and cinderblocks. So this officer comes up and says, "Son, what are you doing here?" I said, "I'm trying to clean my eyes." He said, "Come on. You're going to the hospital." So there was a truck came by. He put me in there, and they went and picked up two or three more guys. And- and so we headed on to Tripler General Hospital. And at the Trenel- Tripler General Hospital that night, oh, about uh.. six or seven o'clock, they had an air raid. And, of course, they comes running through there and they said, "Everybody get under the bed. Get under the bed." Uh.. Not me. I got caught in one building. I'm not gonna caught in. So I went outside. And what it was, they was- the Marines or what have you, shooting antiaircraft, and they were coming and dropping down, because the fuse was too long, or something like that. And eventually it was over, and I

got back into the hospital. And I stayed in the hospital some three weeks. They'd uh.. come by, and they said, "You in pretty good shape. We'll take care of the worse ones." So I lay there four or five days before they ever got to me to do any repair, you know. So they had to- took some while to get my eyes, and they claimed that they had to a magnet to pull out some of the shrapnel out of my eyes. Then uh.. I went on back to Hickam field then, and went to duty, and they had, since the mess hall had been bombed, they had opened up another one. I went down there and it says, "You're gonna be mess sergeant." I said, "What? Mess sergeant?" So they said, "You got three or four cooks, and you got two Chinese. You run this." I took over and fed two hundred men. <Clears throat>

Q: Now you- you said you were in the hospital for three weeks. How did your family find out about what had happened to you?

Jesse Durward Gaines: <Clears throat> They sent a telegram to my family that I was missing in action. And then uh.. I s- while I was in the hospital I sent a letter to my family with a Red Cross letter that I was okay. And uh.. they only told 'em very little, you know. And about a month ago, my niece came to my house from Mississippi and she brought me the letter that I had written my mother. She had found it in the house somewhere, Red Cross letter that- that I sent. <Clears throat> Then my parents, about a couple of months from that, I'd sent a letter home, but they uh.. they had, one of 'em to collect, put in for the insurance that I was missing, you know. And they said, "No. Uh.. We know where he's at." And it took awhile for 'em to clear that up. <Clears throat> Then, again, when they had the Battle of Midway, they got another telegram that I was missing. So things were screwed up a little bit.

Q: What did you do at Midway?

Jesse Durward Gaines: I didn't go to Midway. I don't know how it happened. I lost my squadron commander in Midway, but I didn't go.

Q: Can you tell us something about the activities you were involved in after the attack, after the three weeks in the hospital?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Yeah. I came back to Hickam Field, and opened this mess hall up, and I became mess sergeant and.

Q: Stayed there.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Fed the troops.

Q: Jesse, can you tell us something about your subsequent career un- until you got out, very briefly.

Jesse Durward Gaines: <Clears throat> Well, about six months after that, I became with a ulcer. Had a hemorrhage. They put me back in Tripler General, and I stayed there about three months, and they shipped me back to the States, to Lederberg General Hospital, Tripler General, Tripler General. Oh, I'm getting 'em mixed up. Anyhow, <clears throat> I came back there and- and they uh.. want to discharge me. I said, "I don't want to be discharged." <Clears throat> Excuse me. <drinks water> So they said, "We're gonna send you back to duty." So they sent me back to duty, and I uh.. wound up at Paine Field, Washington. I asked 'em, I told 'em I wanted to be a- go to school, so they sent me to- to school in Amarillo, Texas on B-17 aircraft. <Clears throat> I spent six months there in school and came back to Paine Field. About a month- went to school on B-17's, but they made me work on P-38's, fighter aircraft, what I enjoyed. Then they got orders to send me to Europe, and I went to Europe in October of '43. <Clears throat> I was in the Eighth Air Force 'til the war was over. I was- uh.. my job was uh.. riding inspector for the Eighth Air Force to go around, check airplanes, see whether they were repairable or we should turn 'em over to our administration. And uh.. uh.. the war was over in '45. Then they sent me back to States and put me in a squadron that goes in at uh.. into the Pacific Command again. And while I was home, war was over. Then I reenlisted, and for six years. And I went to Oklahoma City, from there to Garden City, Kansas, from there to Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I was in Atomic Energy Commission. We were flying for six years and we flew the mock A-bombs for ballistics until 1952. Then they sent me to Keesler Field to school in order to go to Europe and open up the depots. They had people over there at the depots didn't know how to run 'em. So I got assigned to England again, to Burtonwood, England. We got over there and we opened a production line to repair the aircraft for the Berlin airlift. I stayed there three years. I had my family over there. Stayed there three years, and came back to Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Stayed there six years and I retired. I was- I achieved a C-Master Sergeant, Chief Master Sergeant. I had eighty-two airplanes, two hundred airmen. And in my whole career uh.. I have never had an airplane lost for maintenance. I have had airplanes lost for pilot error, or material deficient. I

have got recommendations to secure that. I've got Army recommendations, and Air Force recommendations, and I have a Purple Heart.

Q: You retired in 1962.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Nineteen sixty-two, September.

Q: Chief, do you have anything to ask?

Chief: Oh, yes, sir. When you had your eye injury on December seventh, did you have to wear bandages over your eyes? Was that part of the treatment?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Yeah.

Chief: So see, so for a period of time you weren't even able to see.

Jesse Durward Gaines: That's correct.

Chief: How- how long was that period?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Oh, ten days, I guess, something like that. Not sure.

Chief: Alright.

Jesse Durward Gaines: I only have one eye now, but it wasn't caused from that. It was cataract surgery. I went to an eye doctor once to Memphis, and I told him about my having shrapnel. He took a picture and found the shrapnel in my right eye.

Q: Well, thank you, Jesse, for your contribution today. I really appreciate your coming up and giving us your time. Appreciate it very much.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Well, I- I hope I've done something that's good for you.

Q: You sure have. Thanks a lot. I have one.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Okay.

Q: A question just give me a second. When you started out about
<inaudible> with your buddy, how did he- did he survive the war?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Yeah. He survived.

Q: That's good.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Then he became a- a gunner and flew down in the Pacific, and he survived that and came back to Memphis, and he became an alcoholic. Yeah, too bad. Too bad. He was a fine fellow.

Q: You- you- you're from Mississippi, so it was.

Jesse Durward Gaines: I grew up on a cotton farm in the Depression days.

Q: You got to see him after the war?

Jesse Durward Gaines: Uh.. Yes.

Q: Okay.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Yeah. Yep. We were- we knew when hard times were, and ninety percent of the people here today grew up in the Depression, uh.. the survivors. We were- most of 'em were farm boys. They were hard workers. They wasn't scared of work. Lot different today.

Q: That's all I was wondering. Thanks a lot.

Jesse Durward Gaines: Thank you.

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Q: Thank you, sir.

End of Tape 412 Jesse Durward Gaines